His Clattering Grip

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The clutch of mewling dreams and writhing id; the hollow throne of the King in Red. The death knell of Konohagakure spreads spiritual contamination through the world, and decayed Kyuubi rots in an endless sunflower garden. He Had No Fingers sequel.

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Allegro

Chapter One: Allegro

Cardinal had not made much of a good living since her retreat from Konohagakure. Although allied in name, the disasterous events of the last Chunin exam had put a bitter taste in the mouth of the Suna ninja. The political juggernaut that had been Fire Country had refused to release any real details - they had termed it as an "elimination event turned tragically lethal". Every genin team involved had perished, and although Konoha claimed to have suffered losses as well, the amount of D-Rank missions they had taken up until the village's silence had dipped not a bit. To anyone who cared to look, it was an obvious lie.

And then Konohagakure had vanished.

It was a mystery of the highest order, and Cardinal had been interrogated multiple times by the Suna authorities before being released to make her own way as a refugee. Freely submitting to truth serums and answering questions without hesitation had seen her through those weeks relatively without harm. But even with the nest eggs she had saved up since her induction in Konoha ANBU, the price of living in a hostile country was quickly vaporizing whatever funds she managed to dig up. Room and board was half again what it should have cost, groceries twice the market price, weapons out of the question unless she submitted to the Suna-nin's ridiculous demands of enlisting probationarily.

So it was with great reluctance that she pushed open the door to the Kazekage's tower and faced the secretary's dry-witted eyebrow with iron self-control. Asking for the enlistment form elicited a snort from the retired nin behind the desk; his withered fingers thrust the multiple sheets of paper at her with palpable disdain and wordless disdain, and Cardinal turned on her heel and left, the bureaucratic chains crumpling in her left hand. She already knew the Suna-nin

would jump at the opportunity - a nin from any other village carried the jutsus and training techniques out with them, and only willing teachers could teach them effectively to their new hosts.

This wasn't coercion - the price gouging came by way of malicious civilians, not by government action - but the silent satisfaction of the secretary proved that yes, they had been aware that Cardinal would have to come to them sooner or later. It was utterly infuriating, moreso because there was nothing she could do. Konohagakure had no other allies for her to call on.

She climbed the rickety staircase that spiraled at the corner of her apartment building to the fourth floor, stepped out to Room 408, and inserted her key into the lock, little shrieks of metal coming from where grains of sand had worked their way into the mechanical device. The key turned. The door opened. Cardinal blinked heavily as her eyelight adjusted to the sudden dark after the blinding daylight of the desert sun.

Her head throbbed.

Cardinal took two pain pills with a lone swallow of water, tossed off her desert cloak, and curled up on the lone chair standing in the center of the room, where it faced the savaged remains of what had once been her bed. Feathers brown with dirt and dust still cluttered the floor beneath it, beside a shattered broom.

She clenched a kunai in her good left hand and waited. She stared at the bed.

Time passed.

Later that night she heard it again: the sound of wings beating in her dreams, the fall and twirl of feathers; cruel beaks and avian eyes like melting, runny amber. She choked awake and threw the kunai with her good left hand, and heard it thunk into a feather - heard the feather's tinny shriek as it was pinned, the fibrous edge legged as a

centipede, attempting to skitter away under the bed. She dashed over and stomped on it, feeling a thick, sticky liquid gush out beneath her booted foot. Then, extracting the kunai from the broken feather, she hauled up the mattress, straining with the effort of lifting it with her right.

She stared wordlessly at the mass of crumpled, spiny feathers that skittered over and around each other on spindly legs, by the far wall. A furrow nearly an inch deep was etched into the floor there, where one massive pinion mindlessly dug its shaft into the sandstone and scraped away at it.

Two more inches and it would have dug its way right through the stone floor.

Strangling the need to shudder, Cardinal formed six handseals and incinerated the entire spectacle, charring the bottom of her bed badly enough to catch fire as well. She swatted it out while the featherpedes shrieked and scuttled all over the floor, burning down to ash. The pinion was the last to go, sinking its heavy shaft one last time into the trench, leaving the blackened shaft upright as it crumbled down the stem.

Lowering the mattress finally, she glanced around at all the ash on the floor of the room, the ruined bed, the scrapes and heedless sigils notched into the wall by the writhing sussurus of living, insectile feathers.

Silent, she hauled the mattress out onto the narrow walkway beyond her door, tossed it over the side, and hit it with another fire jutsu. It burned just as easily. From a distance, the sound was more like birdcalls, more tolerable. Endurable.

She trudged back to her chair and slumped down to sleep.

In the morning she rose and didn't bother putting on a new uniform. She only had one spare change and wash water was precious in the

desert. Instead, she swallowed another pain pill, had a glass of water for breakfast, grimaced as her stomach growled, and then stepped outside and shut the door. She locked it.

Cardinal turned around, glanced over the edge of the railing, and stared. Her fire jutsu had burnt through the mattress and into the sand, crystallizing it into glass that glimmered like dark sunlight in the grey predawn of the Suna morning.

At the bottom corner, where the grays and blacks warped nearly unrecognizably, Cardinal saw the resemblance of part of a face, and a little hand.

It waved at her.

When she blinked it was gone.

Sfumato

Chapter Two: Sfumato

It was late afternoon when the gate guards of Sunagakure allowed a new batch of refugees into the city - a mask salesman who had once supplied the Leaf ANBU, a pair of cobblers, eight unskilled workers evicted from their farms and a scattering of children. The leading officer, who had been known as Masakara Tuohachi, passed them within, noting that the goodwill of three tradesmen was worth another load of laborers and their dependants. After all, when ninja villages went looking for spies, they almost uniformly took from the ranks of the tradesmen - people whose jobs took them everywhere and secluded them for hours at a time in workshops. It was far more effective to satisfy the trade unions and let them police themselves for spies than to do it oneself against a hostile faction.

Nodding with satisfaction, Masakara pressed the passport stamp down hard on their cards, offering a reserved smile to each; only the children drew an honest smile, their exuberance infectious and uncontained.

Laughing, their hair as blonde as sunlight, they scattered into the streets of the militant nation, leaving behind world-weary adults with the tireless recovery of the young.

Masakara turned back to the line and stamped the next passport, giving another laborer a month to stay in Sunagakure and find an occupation, treating peasant and trader alike, mentally stacking the price of eight families against three more points in the economy. The scales balanced, then slowly slid to the left; and Masakara smiled at the next laborer family in the line, and lifted his stamp once again.

The price of human life per year: One koku. Three hundred litres of water. The illusion of purpose.

From where she sat, silent and unmoving, Cardinal watched the new recruits of ANBU painstakingly exercise under the eyes of the head drillmaster. Her fingers played nervously on a kunai - not that she'd ever had any real skill at throwing them, especially after her first and only suicide attempt. Her hands trembled sometimes, involuntarily - not quite enough to be noticeable to the average civilian or even nin, but enough to destroy any images of range. However, it was Genjutsu she excelled at, and that was her skill to teach to the newest crop of desert-borne assassins.

Her imagination had been ripped open and left gaping in the aftermath of Konohagakure. Minor illusions meant to disorient or merely distract, things of bright lights and phantom sounds, changed into phantasmagoric wastelands that stripped away her targets' minds. HerMomentary Paralysis jutsu, taught to all Leaf ANBU as a textbook technique, gave strong-willed men strokes.

She had tried the Tree Bind Death only once in the months since. She had watched the little metal stake emerge from the ground, the brown, aged barbwire wrap around the kunoichi - her milky pale skin opening beneath the caresses of thorned iron. Cardinal watched as the sun shone bright on the kunoichi's bound face, and the warm life and flaps of yellow that had opened out from the ridges of her head, around her jaw, her temples, the crown of her head. Her hands turned brown as an aged banana and the fingers curls together and together, crushed behind her back into a gentle yellow mass the size of a coconut, in the grips of the wire. Cardinal watched as the stolid expression melted off to leave a dazed nose and a smiling mouth missing teeth, and eyelids melted together and sprouted masses of gold florets like a tiny, precious forest. Cardinal had watched and watched and finally thrown up and the illusion was broken, but there was still nothing that could be called a head just a yellow little ball that curled open and bathed in the sunlight and sleeplessly for weeks she remembered the shine of a yellow-toothed smile from a gold flower.

Cardinal turned her head and spat to the side, and heard the leather of her gloves creak under her grip. It gave her satisfaction - gave her confidence that maybe in this broken world she still had something left of the fearsome ANBU she had once been. Part of *Her* , not *Him* or *Them* or *It* , she couldn't distingush between them anymore.

Cardinal looked at the sand beneath her feet, the sand that the recruits of Suna ANBU pounded with the flats of their feet as they ran laps, and hated it for being yellow.

Of any place she could go in the world, she of course would go to a place where she stood on nothing but an endless field of yellow.

___ **YELLOW** *blue*

Jiraya frowned heavily at his contact - the middleaged man calmly smoking his pipe in the peace of his living room. Nameless throughout their thirty-year association together, he remained one of the few people that the Sannin couldn't exactly predict. They ran parallel spy networks, and often checked information against one another. It was a practice that all Kages flatly forbid and the networks did anyway. The heart of intelligence was communication, after all, and it was simply easier to step around such troublesome facts and not have to push that fact through the commander's ears.

"I don't know." he admitted bluntly, a simple statement that began to take the edge off of the Fire ninja's grief and rage. "Konohagakure stopped admitting visitors about a week after the end of the Chuunin exams - roughly a month later, the refugees started streaming out of the village. None of them will really talk about it, or they can't, or there's been some heavy Genjutsu work done to cover this as an invaasion of some sort. But if that's what it is, it's bizarre. There's been no communcations at all."

Jiraya tapped his fingers on the table, deep in thought. "My first thought was Orochimaru, since he wouldn't do anything but just raze

the village." he noted. "But that doesn't work - he's holed himself up somewhere in Rice Country, and Otogakure isn't even taking missions now."

The other man sighed, and murmured "Bijuu."

Jiraya glanced up and wrinkled his eyebrows in confusion. "What?"

"A new one." His contact elaborated, and took a long draft of smoke. "I think."

"How's that possible?" Jiraya replied slowly, his mind already flickering through the knowledge he had amassed on the monstrous natural spirits.

The other man shrugged. "One died, probably."

___ **YELLOW** *blue*

___ **YELLOW** *blue*

___ **YELLOW** *blue*

He still couldn't hold a paintbrush, yet, but he kept reaching down to pick up the brush and feeling it slip between his

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FAUVISM